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Japanese EFL Writers' Perceptions of, and Reactions to, Written Corrective Feedback

Yoshimasa Ogawa

Abstract

The present study investigated Japanese EFL writers' perceptions of the effects of written corrective feedback (WCF) on language acquisition, using semi-structured interviews and narrative analysis. The interviews with 10 participants indicated that they preferred to receive form-focused feedback more strongly than content-based feedback. This was believed to be influenced by their learning experiences in high school where the use of precisely grammatical forms was emphasized. However, they also acknowledged that content-based feedback encouraged them to work harder and helped them write consistent and coherent paragraphs/essays. A questionnaire survey with 42 participants produced additional evidence for their strong reliance on form-focused feedback. The study also analyzed 25 participants' drafts to evaluate the frequencies at which they utilized teacher feedback on form, content, or paragraphing to revise their texts. The results showed that the participants successfully utilized form-focused and paragraphing-related feedback about three-fourths of the time, whereas they experienced slightly greater difficulty responding to content-based feedback.

Key words: *form-focused feedback, content-based feedback, paragraphing-related feedback*

Introduction

The influence of written corrective feedback (WCF)—either direct error correction or indirect corrective feedback on grammatical errors—on the acquisition of grammatical forms in L2 has been a major research area in applied linguistics. Whereas Truscott (1996, 1999, 2007) once proposed a drastic policy of completely dispensing with form-focused corrective feedback, a number of studies have provided evidence afterward that form-focused feedback on L2 writers' compositions not only served as an editing tool but also helped the participants gain greater accuracy in new pieces of writing (Lalande, 1982; Ferris, 1999, 2004; Ashwell, 2000; Chandler, 2003; Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005; Sheen, 2007; Bitchener, 2008; Ellis, Sheen, Murakami, & Takashima, 2008; Bitchener & Knoch, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Sheen, Wright, & Moldawa, 2009; Van Beuningen, De Jong, & Kuiken, 2012). On the other hand, one major issue that has not been thoroughly explored is L2 writers' perception of the effectiveness of form-focused feedback (i.e., negative feedback on grammatical errors) in various EFL classroom situations. Their perceptions of positive or negative roles of either form-focused or content-based feedback for language acquisition can vary from learning

context to context. Particularly, Japanese university students who received years of focus-on-forms-oriented training (see Long (1991) and Doughty & Williams (1998) for the definitions of focus-on-form and focus-on-forms) in high schools, may have unique ideas of the roles of form-focused and content-based feedback, which might continue to influence the way they respond to teacher written feedback. Their language proficiency is another major factor that may influence their perceptions. Thus, in-depth qualitative research inquiries are believed to contribute to the development of more effective classroom teaching plans and syllabus design for EFL writing courses at Japanese universities.

Interestingly, when Ferris (1999) proposed that error corrections should be provided because of learners' desire for grammar feedback, Truscott (1999) rebuffed this proposal, claiming that learners do not understand what is beneficial for their own learning. However, Truscott did not specify in what ways learners' preferences might or might not match what they needed. Describing EFL learners' perceptions of WCF in various local classroom situations will be the first step to clarify this issue.

The present study is an action research study designed to improve the quality of an EFL course that the researcher teaches himself at a Japanese university. Forty-three first-year students who majored in English language and literature participated in the project. The data for the analysis of their perceptions of WCF were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 participants and a questionnaire survey with the entire group. The interview data were analyzed by means of narrative analysis. The study also attempted to determine the frequencies at which the participants responded to teacher feedback and how successful they were in correcting their own grammatical errors or improving the content of their writing and paragraph structures through text analyses, modeled on Hyland's analytical approach (2003). The written feedback was categorized into three types: form-focused feedback on grammatical errors, feedback on ideational content, and feedback on paragraph construction. Feedback on paragraph structures was set off as a separate category for text analysis because the participants responded to it in a unique way.

Methodologically, a mixed-methods design was used with the qualitative section as the core part. There have been both positive and negative opinions concerning the use of mixed methods. On the one hand, Yanchar and Williams (2006) cautioned that an inappropriate combination of research methods might contradict the epistemological assumptions of one or both methods. On the other hand, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) and Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) argued for positive aspects of the mixed methods: i.e., qualitative and quantitative approaches compensate for each other's weaknesses and can be used to answer a broad range of research questions. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie further stated that researchers have considerable latitude in deciding the degree to which one of the two phrases dominates the study. Based on this latter view, the present study was designed to be a mainly qualitative study supported by small-scale quantitative analyses.

Literature Review

This section reviews the past studies for or against the provision of form-focused feedback, the interrelationship between L2 learners' proficiencies and their desire for form-focused feedback, and the earlier studies that evaluated L2 learners' perceptions of WCF and their actual responses to teacher feedback.

Effects of Written Corrective Feedback on Grammatical Errors

As Manchón (2011) stated, writing tasks make it necessary for L2 learners to pay more attention to linguistic forms and discourse features (e.g., sentence structures, sentence or text connections, paragraphing) than oral tasks and prompt L2 learners to refine their linguistic expressions to accurately represent their ideas. That is, writing practice itself can facilitate language acquisition. However, regarding the issue of whether or not WCF can further enhance learners' attention to linguistic and discourse features, there have been both positive and negative opinions.

Truscott (1996, 1999, 2007) claimed that grammar correction does not improve L2 learners' ability to write accurately at all and argued for the policy of completely dispensing with it. Although acknowledging that grammar correction could help learners edit their essays, he insisted that neither focused nor unfocused corrective feedback contributes to their accuracy in new pieces of writing. The major reasons for Truscott's objection to error correction were: (a) very few teachers can determine their students' current developmental stage and provide feedback on the right grammatical item at the right timing; (b) even if the teacher can recognize and explain an error, students may not understand the explanation; (c) teachers waste an enormous amount of time correcting their students' errors while the students tend to avoid writing more complex sentences for fear of making mistakes, and; (d) learners may indicate their desire for grammatical error correction but do not understand what is beneficial for their own learning. He cited the studies by Semke (1984), Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986), Kepner (1991), and Sheppard (1992) to support his theory and held a firm stance that grammar correction has no role to play in language acquisition.

On the other hand, Ferris (1999) argued that selective, prioritized, and clear types of error correction might be effective and that Truscott's theorizing was excessively strong. Ferris (2004) further indicated that many of the existing studies predicted positive effects for error correction in L2 writing and recommended that teachers provide WCF to students. In her opinion, the teachers could deepen their grammar knowledge and choose the most appropriate form of direct or indirect error correction depending on their students' needs, goals, and individual differences, and editing itself is an important and necessary step toward the acquisition of better writing skills.

A number of studies have provided empirical evidence for the effectiveness of grammatical

error correction. Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) investigated the effects of (a) explicit error correction and student-teacher individual conferences and (b) explicit correction only on migrant ESL students' abilities to use prepositions, the simple past tense, and the definite article in New Zealand. The results indicated that the explicit feedback with individual conferences had a significantly positive effect on their accuracy with the definite article and the past tense—rule-governed linguistic features—although prepositions were not equally amenable to the same treatment. Sheen (2007) evaluated the effects of (a) direct error correction with metalinguistic feedback and (b) direct correction only on ESL students' acquisition of the English articles in the United States and demonstrated that both treatments were more effective than the no-feedback treatment. It was shown that the metalinguistic feedback was particularly effective for long-term acquisition.

Bitchener and his colleagues evaluated ESL students' acquisition of the English definite and indefinite articles in New Zealand. Bitchener (2008) and Bitchener and Knoch (2008, 2009a) compared the effectiveness of (a) direct WCF with written and oral metalinguistic explanation, (b) direct WCF with written explanation, and (c) direct WCF only. All three experimental groups gained greater accuracy than the control group. Bitchener and Knoch (2009b) compared the effectiveness of (a) written meta-linguistic explanation and an oral form-focused review of it, (b) written meta-linguistic explanation, and (c) error circling, concluding that all of the three experimental groups outperformed the control group.

The overall implications of these studies are that: (a) error correction contributes to language acquisition; (b) L2 learners tend to acquire target forms more accurately when guided to understand the rules, instead of being provided with direct correction alone, and; (c) somewhat explicit feedback is more effective.

Language Proficiency and Preference for Form-Focused or Content-Based Feedback

It must also be noted that higher-proficiency and lower-proficiency L2 learners have different expectations concerning either form-focused or content-based written feedback. Hedgcock and Lefkowitz's (1994) questionnaire survey with 137 FL students studying French, Spanish, or German and 110 ESL students showed that FL students paid more attention to form, whereas ESL students had a stronger interest in content feedback. ESL students are normally more proficient in the target language and have experience in writing in broader rhetorical contexts. Consequently, they are less dependent on grammar-oriented feedback and more interested in finer rhetorical structures and writing styles. On the other hand, FL students tend to write in L2 for the purpose of language practice and need more teacher feedback to assemble grammatical sentences. Likewise, Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1996) revealed that FL students perceived revision as the process of eliminating ungrammatical words, phrases, and sentences and believed that form should precede, and have priority over, expression of concepts and original ideas. In contrast, an ESL student expressed her

preference for more content-based feedback. In the same respect, Montgomery and Baker (2007) pointed out that students enrolled in ESL courses were more likely to prefer form feedback than students working on discipline-based papers. These three studies illustrate the fact that L2 learners' preference for form or content feedback depends on their language proficiency.

Learners' Response to Teacher Written Feedback

Hyland (1998, 2003, 2011) investigated ESL students' responses to teacher written feedback and the effects of WCF on their acquisition of writing skills through semi-structured interviews with the teachers and students, teacher think-aloud protocols, and analysis of the students' drafts. The participants were two ESL teachers and six ESL students enrolled in an English proficiency program at a New Zealand university.

The qualitative interviews (Hyland 1998) revealed that a low-intermediate undergraduate student kept ignoring her teacher's grammar-focused feedback and ended up being seriously demotivated because her writing skills never improved, while a high-intermediate graduate student responded to her teacher's form-focused feedback consistently but still lost confidence in her overall writing abilities because her ESL teacher did not offer any positive comments on her grammar and gave an excessive amount of negative feedback. Hyland (2003) reported that another high-intermediate graduate student received only article-related feedback from her teacher and felt dissatisfied at the teacher's failure to provide any feedback on more complex sentence-structure problems. Hyland (2011) showed that a male low-intermediate undergraduate student actively utilized the form-focused feedback and boldly experimented with vocabulary and structures in hopes of receiving more grammar feedback. In this case, the student's linguistic skills in written and spoken English gradually improved.

These interview results suggested that: (a) teachers need to pay close attention to individual learners' personal backgrounds and expectations; (b) written teacher feedback is indispensable for L2 writing, but intensive feedback on a particular grammatical point can keep learners from practicing or acquiring more complex forms, and; (c) learners' failure, or refusal, to pay attention to the teacher's form-focused feedback can invalidate the effectiveness of teacher feedback.

In addition to the interview data, Hyland (2003) computed the ratio of the number of form-focused feedback points to the related revisions in the students' new drafts in order to evaluate the degree to which the students utilized the provided feedback to successfully revise their drafts. Five out of the six participants used a high proportion of the form-focused feedback to revise their drafts.

Overall, the review of the literature has suggested that form-focused WCF plays positive roles for L2 learners' acquisition of grammatical forms (particularly, rule-governed linguistic features) but that the learners' language proficiencies tend to influence their desire for

either form-focused or content-based feedback. There is a possibility that Japanese EFL students might perceive the effectiveness of form-focused feedback differently from ESL students above described because the L2 activities in which they have been engaging are considerably different. Furthermore, the learners' observations might be best analyzed in combination with their successful or unsuccessful responses to teacher feedback.

Research Questions

The following two research questions guided the present study.

Research Question 1: How do Japanese EFL writers perceive the effects of form-focused feedback and content-based feedback on their acquisition of grammatical forms and L2 writing skills?

Research Question 2: How effectively do the participants utilize the teacher written feedback to revise their drafts?

There was no a priori hypothesis for either research question proposed.

Method

Research Site and Participants

The present project is an action research study to identify ways to improve the quality of an EFL course at a Japanese university in Tokyo and, by doing so, bridge the gap between academic research and classroom teaching (see Wallace (1998) and Burns (2005) for the purposes of action research). It is beyond the scope and nature of this study to generalize beyond its boundary. The teacher was the researcher himself, and 43 first-year students enrolled in the reading and writing course in the fall of 2014 (n=25) or in the spring of 2015 (n=18) participated in the research project. The students were all female and majored in English language and literature. The mean of the 2014 group's TOEIC scores was 519.80 (SD=14.92), and that of the 2015 group's scores was 393.06 (SD=68.09).

Forty-two of the 43 participants responded to a questionnaire survey, and 10 (six in 2104 and four in 2015) voluntarily participated in interview sessions. The text analysis, designed to measure the students' response to feedback, was conducted on the 278 drafts submitted by the 2014 group alone. This was because most participants in 2014 submitted a complete set of drafts for each writing assignment whereas the 2015 participants failed to submit the required drafts more often. The latter group was also unique in that their TOEIC mean was somewhat lower and the standard deviation was large, indicating noticeable individual differences. Therefore, as far as the statistical analysis was concerned, the researcher decided to use the 2014 data alone.

Instructional Procedure

The participants submitted three drafts for each of the four writing assignments during the semester, that is, after receiving the teacher's explanations about the paragraph structure for a new rhetorical pattern and engaging in controlled writing exercises. Regarding the first two writing assignments for the 2014 group, the teacher provided content-based feedback and paragraph-structure feedback on the first draft and provided form-focused feedback on the second draft, using error codes (e.g., *WW* for wrong word, *art* for articles). As for the third and fourth writing tasks, however, the teacher modified his policy and provided some form-focused feedback, as well as content-based feedback, on the first draft and offered additional form feedback on the second draft. This was because the interviewees in 2014 expressed their preference for continual provision of form feedback. On the third draft, the teacher corrected all the remaining grammatical errors directly and offered an overall comment on each participant's writing. The grades were given only on the last draft based on the quality of the final product and the participants' efforts in the revising processes.

Instrumentation and Procedure for Data Collection

Interview design and procedure. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand how the participants perceived, or reacted to, teacher written feedback. Interviews can be regarded as "meaningful speech or conversations between the interviewer and the interviewee" (Mishler, 1986, pp. 10–11) and are utilized to understand "the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). In the present study, the interviewer encouraged the informants to recount their personal language-learning experiences, incidents, or episodes during the course work—or any previous learning experiences—and tried to find commonalities among different observations within or between informants. The interviews, conducted in Japanese, encouraged an in-depth description of the participants' beliefs about positive and negative aspects of WCF and elicited the recounting of their experiences without being overly dependent on a set of formally phrased questions.

The researcher conducted all the interviews by himself and interviewed one participant at a time in his office which all participants had visited before at least once or twice. With the interviewees' consent, all interviews were audiotaped from the beginning to the end for later transcription. Each interview session took about 20 minutes, and each participant was interviewed twice. The first-round interviews were administered at a half-way point during the semester. Broad questions had been prepared concerning their L2 writing strategies, their perceptions of the roles of written feedback, and the type or amount of feedback they preferred to receive. The second interviews were conducted at the end of the semester to ask follow-up questions regarding the major issues brought up during the first interviews and the participants' reflections on their experiences concerning the in-class and take-home writing assignments.

Questionnaire survey. A questionnaire survey was administered at the last class session to evaluate all the participants' perceptions of WCF. One student was absent, and the *N*-size was reduced to 42.

The participants were, first, asked to indicate their preference for receiving either form-focused feedback or content-based feedback on the answer sheet; they were allowed to choose both alternatives. Those who wanted to receive form feedback were further asked to indicate (a) the error categories on which they wanted feedback (e.g., syntax, lexical items or phrases, paragraph construction devices, spelling, mechanics), (b) their preference for focused or unfocused feedback (e.g., all errors, one major target form, two or three errors per essay, four or five errors per essay, a somewhat limited number of errors if the errors were numerous), and (c) the types of corrective feedback they preferred (e.g., direct error correction, use of error codes, circling or underlining, indication of the number of errors per page, metalinguistic explanation, provision of reformulated samples). Multiple answers were permitted. Regarding the content-based feedback, the participants were asked to specify whether they preferred: (a) only content feedback, (b) both content and form feedback, (c) brief comments that evidenced that the teacher had read their essays, and (d) positive comments that encouraged them to write more. Their responses to the survey questions were designed to be compared with the interviewees' comments, although only the major findings that resonated, or were contrasted, with the interview results are summarized and reported in the Results section.

Writing sample. As above mentioned, the participants were asked to submit three drafts for each of the four writing assignments, and the drafts submitted by the 2014 students were used. However, as a few students missed a few drafts each, the total number of drafts for analysis was 278.

With the participants' consent, the researcher/teacher made Xeroxed copies of all drafts on which he had written error codes or comments before returning the original drafts so that he could track their self-corrections from Draft 1 to Draft 2 or from Draft 2 to Draft 3. The types of correction (form, content, and paragraph) and the participants' response (successful revision, unsuccessful revision, and no response) were cross-tabulated, and interesting types of errors or self-corrections were highlighted in color for qualitative analysis.

Instrumentation and Procedure for Data Analysis

Transcription. All taped interviews were first transcribed verbatim and were later edited to the extent that the meanings of messages were not affected. According to Kvale (1996), researchers are allowed to either transcribe an interview verbatim if detailed linguistic features serve some analytical purposes or to edit the interviewee's statements into a more formal style, summarizing parts that carry little relevant information. Cut-off

verbatim quotes may even embarrass or displease the interviewees if they are not in accord with the way they intended to express their message. In the present study, unnecessary or nonstandard linguistic features, such as interjections, false starts, colloquial sentence endings, and unimportant repetitions, were deleted from the quoted texts in order not to distract the readers' attention.

Narrative analysis. Narrative parts were extracted from the transcripts and analyzed in order to understand learners' experiences and perceptions and to find commonalities among different observations and statements within or between the participants.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) emphasized the importance of narrative analysis saying that "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (p. 2). Casanave (2005) further explained that "narrative connects and configures parts of human experiences into meaningful larger chunks" (p. 18). The narrator and the researcher collaboratively construct meanings; the former tells and retells stories over time, and the latter constructs his/her stories and meanings for particular research purposes.

Another major aspect of narrative analysis is finding commonalities between different events or stories. Stories from different sources may constitute similar patterns, and particular stories or events recounted can be categorized into genres, generating what Bruner (1996) referred to as generic particularity. In the same respect, Polkinghorne (1997) proposed that a narrative format presents events and actions from a diachronic perspective and transforms a series of seemingly disconnected happenings into a unified story. This helps to account for a common cause or purpose. Careful observations are believed to provide clearly defined genres into which particular cases of learning experiences and strategies might fall.

Some interviewees' observations are quoted in the Results section, using pseudonyms, to relate their interesting narratives to their personal backgrounds and idiosyncrasies.

Analysis of non-narrative data. Sentence-level statements that did not constitute stories were used to support or bridge the narrative data, using a traditional system for coding and categorizing interview data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). An initial list of categories included: (a) effectiveness of WCF, (b) form-focused or content-based feedback, and (c) response to teacher feedback. Meaningful ideas, facts, and keywords were marked in the transcripts and tentatively labeled using provisional codes. While examining the data, the researcher continually re-categorized the codes, or categories, to cluster similar facts and ideas for analysis and interpretation.

Text analysis. The participants' drafts were analyzed to evaluate the frequencies at which they responded to the teacher's written feedback. The number of usable feedback points provided and the number of feedback points that the participants responded to were

counted in order to measure the extent to which the participants attended to, or utilized, the feedback. Modeled on Hyland's procedure (1998, 2003), first, the number of teacher feedback instances in learners' drafts were identified and counted and were, subsequently, categorized into form feedback, content feedback, and paragraph feedback. Second, the proportions of the feedback points that the participants utilized to revise their drafts, either perfectly or imperfectly, were computed. Both the students' self-corrections in the second drafts based on the first-draft feedback and their corrections in the third drafts based on the second-draft feedback were counted. The drafts were also qualitatively analyzed to find if there were any unique patterns in the way the participants attended to, or processed, teacher feedback.

Preliminary and final essay tests. Preliminary and final essay tests were administered to the 2014 class ($n=25$). An assessment of their overall improvement in writing over the semester was believed to demonstrate that the EFL course was generally effective enough to constitute a sound research environment. The preliminary and final essay tests required participants to describe what they would do if they were *the king of a country* or if they had been raised as *a perfectly balanced bilingual*, respectively. The writer/researcher and another experienced EFL teacher with a Ph.D. in the field of language and culture graded the preliminary and final essays holistically on a 5-point scale based on the criteria of content, grammar, vocabulary, paragraph construction, and sociolinguistic skills. Participants received five points if their writing was nearly perfect in terms of these five criteria and one point if it was totally unacceptable. They earned four points for good work, three points for acceptable work, and two points for somewhat problematic writing. A paired-samples *t*-test was performed to determine whether or not the means for the two tests differed significantly. The alpha level was set at 0.05.

Results

Preference for Form-Focused or Content-Based Feedback

In order to understand which category of feedback the participants preferred to receive (i.e., form-focused feedback or content-based feedback), semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire survey were conducted.

First of all, the 10 interviewees unanimously expressed their preference for form-focused feedback, which was affirmed by the fact that all 42 questionnaire respondents indicated their desire for grammatical error correction. It is noteworthy that there was no difference between the 2014 group and the 2015 group despite a notable difference in their TOEIC scores. The interviewees agreed that accurate grammatical knowledge was important for conveying a message correctly in L2 and shared the common feeling that they would be likely to make the same mistakes repeatedly unless the teacher intervened and corrected their errors. Although writing practice itself might facilitate EFL learners' acquisition of

writing skills to some extent, they believed that it was imperative that they learn accurate grammatical forms through WCF at early stages of L2 writing training.

花子：書くってことはやはり文法的な順番にきれいに並べることによって英語がしっかりとした文章として成り立つと思うので，一番最初に文法を直してもらった方が，コツとしてもここが間違っていたっていうのが最初に分かるのでいいと思います。

Hanako: I think that, as far as writing is concerned, we can compose a good English passage only by putting together sentences based on grammatical rules, so it's best to have our grammatical errors corrected at the earliest stage of writing training. By doing so, we'll notice what was wrong and get a knack [for L2 composition]. (Hanako Interview 1)

恵：間違ったものをそのままずっと，間違ったままで続けてしまうと，その癖が抜けなくなるかもしれないので，添削は必要だと思います。

Megumi: If we keep using ungrammatical forms without being corrected, we may never kick the bad habits. So, I think error correction is necessary. (Megumi Interview 1)

Hanako's reaction to the way that the teacher provided content-based feedback first and form-focused feedback later offered an insight into how Japanese learners perceived WCF. Hoping to be an EFL teacher in elementary school, she assumed that grammatical accuracy was important and had always had expectations of grammatical error correction on every draft. Therefore, when she was given back the first draft with very few error corrections on it, she mistakenly assumed that her writing was nearly perfect. Then, she was shocked to find a large number of grammatical errors indicated on her second draft.

花子：最初に内容を直してもらっているというのは後で気づいたんですけど，最初のドラフトを返してもらった時，文法の間違いがないのかなって勘違いしたんですよ。で，2番目のドラフトが真っ赤になって返ってきて，ああこんなに間違ってたんだって思って。その分けてあるのが分かってなかったので，なんで後からもう一回なんだろうって。

Hanako: Though I later realized we were supposed to receive content-based feedback on the first draft, at the time I got my first draft back, I just thought I hadn't made any grammatical errors. Then, when I got back my second draft marked up in red, I was shocked at the fact that I'd actually made so many errors. As I hadn't realized content and form feedback were being provided separately, I wondered why I was receiving more error corrections on the second draft. (Hanako Interview 1)

L2 writing activities in Japanese high schools were normally limited to focus-on-forms composition practice, and it might have had a lasting effect on the students' perception of what WCF was supposed to be. Interestingly, Mei was an exceptional first-year EFL writer in that she had received systematic training in paragraph writing in high school, but her

high-school experience has provided strong evidence indicating that Japanese EFL learners' perception of WCF was heavily influenced by the high-school classroom culture. She had entered the university on recommendation, and the only test that she took was an English essay-writing test. In preparation, she had personally received writing training from her high-school teacher. She submitted a new draft to her English teacher almost on a daily basis, working on a new topic every week. Her paragraph-writing training was very intensive and lasted for about a half year. However, when she experienced difficulties with the use of relative pronouns, her teacher had engaged her in grammar analysis exercises again to help her understand the target structure explicitly, i.e., reverting from communicative writing practice to sentence-level focus-on-forms writing exercises. When asked in an interview how she might handle the hypothetical conditional—a more complex grammatical form—in free writing, Mei jocularly answered that she would try not to use that form in the first place. In a context where the use of a hypothetical conditional was unavoidable, she admitted that she would choose to understand the structure explicitly through objective grammar analysis exercises.

Form-focused feedback was also appreciated by some students as an efficient form of scaffolding. Yuno, who was not confident about her L2 grammatical accuracy and writing skills, was so concerned about her grammatical mistakes that she had tended to use very easy structures and vocabulary items, resorting to a fail-safe strategy. Then, the teacher's provision of error corrections or more appropriate lexical items encouraged her to take risks to produce ideationally denser, and structurally more complex, writings. In other words, she felt that her attentional resources were so limited that she could not attend to content and form at the same time and that the teacher's provision of negative feedback on grammatical errors helped to ease the burden and motivated her to try to express her ideas more specifically.

Regarding the specific syntactic rules they found difficult, the interviewees expressed their desire for feedback on verb conjugation, definite and indefinite articles, simple-past and remote-past tenses, the plural marker-*s*, and past participle. Some also said that the accurate use of conjunctives (e.g., *because*), adverbial conjunctives (e.g., *therefore*), relative pronouns, hypothetical conditionals, infinitives, and direct and indirect speech posed a challenge to them. Satsuki, who was always on the lookout for new learning strategies, and Megumi, who did thorough research and wrote lengthy and informative essays, both felt that WCF was particularly effective for rule-governed items like tense agreement.

Another major category of linguistic knowledge that the participants expected to learn through teacher feedback was vocabulary. Most interviewees understood the importance of broad and accurate lexical knowledge and acknowledged that their vocabulary was too limited to express nuances or compose sophisticated sentences in English. Izumi said that her writings tended to be like "junior-high second-grader's composition," believing that she

only used basic vocabulary items, and, therefore, appreciated the teacher's provision of concise or idiomatic lexical phrases where she was likely to use awkward, convoluted expressions.

泉：なんか，何とかの何とかの何とかって言いたい時に of がいっぱい出てきちゃったりするから，そうするとなんかウザいんじゃないかなって思っちゃうから，そういうのをどうやって短くすればいいのかなって。

Izumi: When I want to say "something of something of something," I end up using *of* many times in one sentence. Then, I feel that my sentence is kind of corny and wonder how I can shorten the phrase. (Izumi Interview)

In the same respect, Yuno also expressed her desire for repeated feedback on her use of idioms and lexical phrases.

The questionnaire survey showed that 39 out of the 42 wished for feedback on their inappropriate use of words and lexical phrases. Twenty-one student in 2014 indicated their desire for feedback on lexical items and 18 in 2015 indicated so; again, there was no noticeable difference between the two groups.

The interviewees showed comparatively less interest in content-based feedback than in form-focused feedback. However, some interviewees felt that comments that praised the content of their writing encouraged them to work harder. For example, Satsuki stated that content-based comments made her writing and drafting more enjoyable because it reassured her that real-life interpersonal communication was taking place between her, as the writer, and the teacher. Regarding more technical advice, Shiori appreciated the comments indicating that a certain part of her paragraph needed to be elaborated on or that her description had deviated from the main topic. Mei perceived her high-school teacher's advice for developing strategies to attract the target readers' attention as useful and remembered this guidance as a university student. The implication is that form and content feedback had different roles to play.

The questionnaire results showed that 37 participants (21 in 2014 and 16 in 2015) out of the 42 preferred to receive content-based feedback. Ten (six in 2014 and four in 2015) expressed their desire for more content-based feedback than form-focused feedback, although the researcher identified that, overall, they needed both types of feedback, based on the interview and survey data.

Coincidentally, some of the interviewees also mentioned that the content-based and form-focused feedback played different roles in their L1 and L2. That is, they did not feel any need for form-focused feedback in Japanese because it was their first language and they were confident about their ability to compose grammatical sentences and make themselves understood. Although they might occasionally end up using long-winded expressions or mix the sentence endings for the respectful and plain writing styles (e.g., *desu/masu* as opposed

to *da/dearu*), they felt that they could still compose comprehensible sentences. Instead, they appreciated the teacher's comments on the incoherent or inconsistent aspects of their discourse organization, which was likely to cause semantic or pragmatic ambiguity. On the other hand, in English composition, form-focused feedback on their use of syntactic or lexical forms was indispensable for accurate communication of messages. In other words, when they become more advanced in English, they may be increasingly interested in content-based feedback.

Twenty (10 in 2014 and 10 in 2015) out of 42 survey respondents indicated their desire for feedback on paragraph structure. However, paragraph feedback can overlap content-based feedback (e.g., cohesive organization of ideas or elaboration on important points) or form-focused feedback (e.g., use of sequence markers). Therefore, participants' comments directly related to paragraph structure feedback were few in number.

Response to Teacher Feedback

The quantitative assessment of the extent to which they utilized written feedback to revise their drafts was implemented mainly by means of text analyses, partially supported by interview data. The table shows the frequencies at which teacher feedback was provided and the frequencies at which the participants responded correctly, or partially correctly, to the provided feedback. The numbers in parentheses indicate the proportions of each category of response: form-focused, content-based, and paragraphing-related feedback.

First, the number of form-focused feedback points that the teacher provided on all the submitted drafts was 516, which was by far greater than the combined number of content-

Table
Response to the Provided WCF

	Feedback Offered	Repaired	Partially Repaired	Not Repaired
Task 1 Form	70	46 (66%)	0 (0%)	24 (34%)
Task 1 Paragraph	19	12 (63%)	0 (0%)	7 (37%)
Task 1 Content	4	3 (75%)	0 (0%)	1 (25%)
Task 2 Form	105	76 (72%)	2 (2%)	27 (26%)
Task 2 Paragraph	30	21 (70%)	0 (0%)	9 (30%)
Task 2 Content	16	12 (75%)	0 (0%)	4 (25%)
Task 3 Form	195	143 (73%)	6 (3%)	46 (24%)
Task 3 Paragraph	5	4 (80%)	0 (0%)	1 (20%)
Task 3 Content	4	2 (50%)	0 (0%)	2 (50%)
Task 4 Form	146	112 (77%)	9 (6%)	25 (17%)
Task 4 Paragraph	2	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Task 4 Content	6	2 (33%)	1 (17%)	3 (50%)
Form Total	516	377 (73%)	17 (3%)	122 (24%)
Paragraph Total	56	39 (70%)	0 (0%)	17 (30%)
Content Total	30	19 (63%)	1 (3%)	10 (33%)

based points (30) and paragraph feedback points (56). The skewed proportions can be accounted for by the fact that the participants were enrolled in their inaugural university EFL writing course. Writing assignments on more sophisticated topics might require more content-based feedback. The teacher's bias for, or instructional emphasis on, form-focused instruction is also acknowledged.

Overall, the participants' close attention to the feedback and their efforts to utilize them were clearly recognized. They responded to 377 out of 516 form-focused feedback points to repair their errors correctly (73%). They sometimes transformed the indicated parts into imperfect forms (17 instances or 3%), but such cases were rare. A one-way chi-square test was conducted to determine the level of statistical significance, and the results were significant, $\chi^2(2, 516)=398.55$, $p=0.001$. The proportion of students who repaired their errors perfectly ($P=0.73$) was much greater than the hypothesized proportion of 0.33, whereas the proportion of those who partially corrected their errors ($P=0.03$) and the proportion of those who did not repair the errors ($P=0.24$) were less than the hypothesized proportions of 0.33.

The teacher endeavored to provide feedback on every error. The number of form-focused feedback points he offered, which, consequently, roughly corresponded to the number of errors that the participants made, varied from task to task. Hence, the number of teacher feedback points (or student errors) did not linearly decrease over the semester. For example, the first writing task, which required the writers to describe the way from one geographical location to another, was comparatively easy, and the teacher provided 70 feedback points. In response, the participants repaired 46 of their errors correctly (66%). The second task required participants to describe their partners' physical features and personality characteristics; they utilized 76 of the 105 points of feedback to repair their errors (72%). The third task, which required the participants to present personal opinions, was somewhat more difficult; they responded correctly to 143 out of the 195 feedback points (73%). Finally, the fourth task required the writing of a comparison/contrast essay; they utilized 112 of the 146 feedback points to repair their errors (77%). Even though the number of feedback points provided varied from task to task, the rate at which the participants utilized form-focused feedback to successfully revise their drafts remained more or less the same throughout the semester.

On the other hand, the participants responded correctly to 19 out of 30 content-based comments (63%). The results of a one-way chi-square test were significant, $\chi^2(2, 30) =16.20$, $p=0.001$. The proportion of students who repaired their errors correctly ($P=0.63$) was much greater than the hypothesized proportion of 0.33. The proportion of those who corrected their errors partially ($P=0.03$) was less than the hypothesized proportion of 0.33. The proportion of those who did not repair the errors ($P=0.33$) was the same as the hypothesized proportion. Students had slightly greater difficulty utilizing content-based feedback than

when handling form-focused feedback.

They responded correctly to 39 out of the 56 paragraph-structure feedback points (70%), successfully revising their drafts approximately two-thirds of the time. The results of a one-way chi-square test were significant, $\chi^2(2,\ 56)=8.64$, $p=0.003$. The proportion of students who repaired their errors correctly ($P=0.70$) was much greater than the hypothesized proportion of 0.33, whereas the proportion of those who did not repair the errors ($P=0.30$) was less than the hypothesized proportion of 0.33.

A first-hand examination of the submitted texts provided additional evidence that most participants were methodically checking the provided feedback in the process of their drafting. They were instructed to staple a new draft on top of the earlier version(s) and submit all the versions for the same writing task. As far as the second draft of the first writing assignment was concerned, 12 out of the 24 students ticked off each error correction on the draft that they had gotten back from the teacher and wrote, in pencil, the repaired form above or below it before typing up the revised version for submission. Inscribing the repaired forms on the original draft in pencil was not part of the required resubmission procedure, and they voluntarily did so in order not to miss any point.

It is also noteworthy that the participants did not repair all errors with confidence. There were cases in which the writers put a question mark next to the repaired parts in their revised drafts, explicitly indicating that they were not confident about the way they fixed their errors. Such reaction to feedback resonated with one interviewee's observation that she always tried her best to repair the indicated errors and later tested her hypotheses by comparing them to the corrections or reformulations that the teacher provided (Shiori interview). There is a possibility that other students resorted to the same drafting strategy.

Furthermore, the text analyses provided hints concerning which types of errors or problems required repeated feedback. The use of correct verb-tense forms, subject-verb agreement, and definite and indefinite articles seemed to present a challenge to the participants, clearly requiring repeated teacher feedback.

The types of content-based feedback most frequently provided, and utilized, were instructions to provide detailed descriptions on an important point or to specify the referent of a pronoun (e.g., *holding a part-time job*, instead of *it*). Concerning the detailed description, the participants' response varied from person to person. Some expanded their essays substantially to express meaningful ideas in greater detail, whereas others simply added a few words to act as evidence that they responded to the feedback. On the other hand, specifying the referent of a pronoun was a much easier task, and those who paid attention to the teacher feedback tended to resolve this problem after the first feedback.

Among the three feedback categories, paragraph-structure feedback seemed to have a particularly long lasting effect on the participants' writing. First of all, most participants mastered the basic paragraph construction (e.g., a main idea sentence, supporting sentences,

and a concluding sentence) after receiving the teacher's metalinguistic explanation in class. Then, most of those who did not fully understand it learned the rule after the first feedback session. A few students were confused about the paragraph structure at the beginning and continued to write a list of sentences, instead of a paragraph, until mid-semester. However, all grasped the basic structure by the end of the semester. In addition, they learned other paragraphing rules and devices (e.g., indentation, sequence markers) and different rhetorical patterns after receiving negative feedback once or twice. Very few started making the same paragraphing errors again.

Preliminary and Final Essays

In order to determine if the participants' overall EFL writing skills improved, the means for the preliminary and final essay tests were compared. First, the result of a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient test showed that the inter-rater reliability between the researcher and the other rater was 0.94. Then, the mean of the two raters' scores were computed, and the paired-samples *t*-test results showed that the final essay test mean (M =4.20, SD=0.97) was significantly higher than the preliminary essay test mean (M=2.54, SD =0.62), $t(23)=7.71$, $p=0.001$, evidencing that the participants' overall L2 writing skills improved after four months of writing practice and provision of WCF.

Discussion

Research Question 1 was: How do Japanese EFL writers perceive the effects of form-focused feedback and content-based feedback on their acquisition of grammatical forms and L2 writing skills? The answer was that they generally perceived form-focused WCF as more useful than content-based feedback for the acquisition of grammatical forms in L2 writing. All participants indicated their preference for form-focused feedback, whereas some acknowledged that content-based feedback had its important roles to play.

The participants in this study were first-year English majors who had just started learning communicative skills in written and spoken English, and this was partially the reason why they were heavily dependent on the teacher's form-focused WCF. Their preference for form-focused feedback was in accord with the earlier researchers' proposal that learners with less linguistic experience or lower-proficiency relied more heavily on form-focused WCF than higher-proficiency learners (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994; Montgomery & Baker, 2007). The fact that some of the interviewees expressed their stronger desire for form feedback in L2 writing than in L1 writing also resonated with this commonly observed tendency.

As mentioned in the Result section, a significant point is that the participants' preference for form-focused feedback was derived from the EFL classroom culture in Japanese junior high and high schools where grammatical accuracy was strongly emphasized

and error correction was the predominant type of written feedback provided. For most participants, it was the only type of feedback they had received before entering the university, although mostly in sentence-level composition, and they perceived it to be the major part of the instructional routine in EFL writing courses. Japanese students' tendency to retain their high-school learning strategy is not uncommon, as is illustrated by Ono, Midorikawa, and Robson's (2001) report that the emphasis on reading aloud and translation in high school had a lasting influence on junior-college students' language learning styles even after they were taught more practical reading strategies. In the present study, even the participant who had received training in paragraph writing in high school regarded the focus-on-forms grammar analysis exercises as the base for L2 writing training. It seemed that their focus-on-forms-oriented view of L2 writing had developed through junior-high-school and high-school EFL education and continued to influence their learning strategy even after they became English majors in university.

Another useful discovery concerning the participants' preference for form-focused feedback was that learners with limited linguistic knowledge or attentional resources might feel encouraged to take risks when they expected negative feedback on grammatical errors from the teacher. Some learners utilized the teacher's form-focused feedback to test their hypotheses about linguistic structures while repairing their own errors. In addition, there were students who explicitly indicated their feeling of uncertainty about their self-corrections. Thus, whereas Hyland (1998, 2003) reported that excessive form-focused feedback on basic grammatical forms prevented ESL learners from trying to use more complex structures, the present study illustrated a positive role of constant form-focused feedback for Japanese EFL students, who utilized it to compensate for their linguistic weaknesses.

Participants' perceptions varied regarding whether they wanted more feedback on rule-governed items or on lexical items. Higher-proficiency students tended to need WCF only on rule-governed linguistic features, which was in accord with Bitchener, Young, and Cameron's (2005) findings. However, those who needed more scaffolding appreciated the teacher feedback on lexical items including prepositions. For example, they could not automatically recall the right preposition as part of a lexical phrase and expected repeated WCF until they finally assimilated the unfamiliar form. The implication is, however, that even the weaker students might learn to deal with lexical phrases with less feedback as they become more advanced writers in the future.

Research Question 2 was: How effectively do the participants utilize the teacher written feedback to revise their drafts? Most participants consistently paid attention to teacher feedback, and they successfully repaired approximately two-thirds to three-fourths of their grammatical or discourse-construction errors. They utilized the content-based feedback slightly less efficiently, but this was not surprising with the first-year EFL students because the content-based comments required them to think deeply to generate new ideas and, as

first-year university students, they could not do so with great facility.

It is acknowledged that their self-correction was basically an editorial task. However, the participants' positive reaction to WCF was recognized, the indirect teacher feedback using codes engaged them in some cognitive thinking, and their general writing abilities improved over the semester, supporting the view that editing itself contributes to the acquisition of writing skills as long as the teacher engages learners in cognitive problem-solving by providing indirect corrective feedback and requiring them to revise their texts (Ferris, 2004).

Text analysis and interview results combined showed that paragraph feedback had a stronger carryover effect on Japanese EFL students' L2 writing than grammar-focused or content-based feedback. This is most likely because the number of paragraph construction rules is limited, and the participants must apply them to every writing task. This research project was completed within a semester, and after a summer or spring break, some students might forget the rules they have learned. However, even if they suffer a temporary setback, they can easily reacquire the same rules after receiving repeated feedback.

The text analyses and interviews also suggested that Japanese EFL teachers should provide more WCF on the basic grammatical forms that learners need to use in any type of writing. Although there are many other complex grammatical forms, including relative pronouns and hypothetical conditionals, L2 writers can choose to avoid such complex structures and express their ideas by using simpler structures. On the other hand, even the simplest sentences would involve verb conjugation, subject-verb agreement, and the articles, and L2 students with a limited command of English often cannot fully attend to those forms during real-time language processing. Consequently, the basic forms that occur frequently may be worth emphatic or repeated teacher feedback.

Item learning involving lexical items differs from system learning, and the participants' use of new vocabulary items, lexical phrases, or idiomatic usage of prepositions and articles in noun phrases varies from person to person. Some learners, who are not expert at grammatical analysis but confident about their ability to rote-memorize words/phrases, might benefit more from direct error correction. More analytical learners might utilize repeated indirect feedback better. Thus, the teacher must pay attention to individual learners' characteristics and proficiencies to the best of their abilities although it is often difficult in a large class involving some unmotivated students.

Conclusion

The study results indicated that all participants preferred to receive form-focused feedback so that they could express their ideas accurately, whereas some also appreciated content feedback for organizing their paragraphs better and acquiring techniques to attract the audience's attention. They consistently paid attention to teacher feedback and utilized it to

revise their texts, which is an important step for the acquisition of L2 writing skills. The teacher provided paragraphing-related feedback less frequently, but the paragraphing rules were applicable to every new piece of writing and thus had a lasting effect on EFL learners' writing and, psychologically, allowed them to enjoy a feeling of self-confidence and satisfaction. Some individual differences were observed regarding the way learners responded to WCF, which was clearly attributable to their linguistic proficiencies and language-learning experiences.

This study was designed to be an action research project, and the results have suggested the following measures to improve the quality of the pertinent EFL course. First, the teacher may continue to provide form-focused feedback to guide students to notice, and repair, their own errors. However, it is imperative that he keep track of the students' improvement in L2 skills and regulate the provision of form and content feedback, depending on their current language proficiencies and their past writing experiences. It must be noted that the introduction of a new topic or rhetorical pattern also requires reconsideration of the proportions of form and feedback to offer and the order in which form, content, and paragraph feedback are provided.

Comprehensive and constant form-focused feedback is likely to encourage novice L2 writers to take risks and expand their repertoire of sentence structures and expressions because they are reassured that the correct forms will be eventually provided. Unfocused feedback is preferable because students clearly prefer feedback on all grammatical forms, hoping to improve their overall writing skills, but the teacher should be careful not to overwhelm, or intimidate, them with an excessive amount of form feedback. If the target forms need to be prioritized, the basic error types that L2 writers cannot avoid using in any type of paragraph or essay writing (e.g., verb-tense problems, subject-verb agreement, definite and indefinite articles) should be treated first.

On the other hand, the teacher may gradually increase the amount of content feedback as the students build up their writing experiences and learn to compose longer pieces of writing. Occasional reversion to the focus-on-forms grammar explanation is by no means harmful as far as the untreatable forms are concerned, but the students should be guided to compose more ideationally informative essays in finer rhetorical forms so that they would be ready for more advanced EFL, or ESL, courses.

Now that it is clear that most students tend to edit their paragraphs carefully in response to WCF, the teacher may try to guide them gradually to acquire independent learning strategies to discover and retain new grammatical forms and writing techniques of their own accord. One practical strategy for this purpose is to make students log their own ideas and write up a chart of the types of errors they make frequently, so that they can use it as a check list in editing their essays, instead of waiting for the repeated teacher feedback on the same errors. The students have tended to utilize the provided feedback conscientiously,

but they need to be guided to be more autonomous learners.

The study illustrated several issues for future investigation. Again, the most interesting finding was that the classroom cultures in high school had a persistent effect on the university students' perceptions of form-focused and content-based feedback. Thus, it is necessary to investigate which specific grammatical forms learners acquired through focus-on-forms teaching in high school and have brought to the university writing class. Additional in-depth interviews and questionnaire surveys may help clarify this issue.

The next major point of investigation is to determine which specific grammatical forms, or discourse construction devices WCF can help Japanese EFL learners acquire. Now that the learners' perceptions of WCF have been explained in detail, the next stage is to evaluate its actual effects on language acquisition. One alternative approach is to prepare a test tailored to what every learner has learned through the assigned writing tasks. However, the administration of such tests would be extremely time-consuming and entail logistic difficulties for the teachers who must deal with a large number of students. Thus, the best compromise suggests administration of the preliminary- and final-essay tests that measure learners' acquisition of several high-frequency grammatical forms. The basic grammatical rules that they use frequently in any form of L2 writing (e.g., subject-verb agreement, tense agreement, pronoun forms, the article system, and lexical phrases often used as discourse construction devices) are the major target forms for investigation.

Another major issue that needs to be addressed in future studies is the timing for providing form, content, and paragraph-structure feedback. It is common practice to provide content feedback on the first draft and form feedback on later drafts. However, different groups of EFL or ESL students have different language-learning schema and utilize the provided feedback in different ways. Even the same student might change his/her learning strategy in the process of acquiring finer linguistic forms and discourse-level writing skills. Further investigation concerning the order in which different categories of feed are provided is indubitably an important research issue to pursue.

The present project has described a group of Japanese EFL students' perceptions of, and responses to, WCF in a particular classroom context. The results of this study, although a small-scale action research project, have laid an important foundation for future studies about the effects of WCF on EFL learners' acquisition of individual grammatical forms and about the amount of form-focused feedback to be provided on each draft or at each stage of a writing course. Every category of feedback (form, content, and paragraph feedback) has an important role to play for language acquisition, and the ultimate goal for EFL teachers is to determine the optimal combination of different categories of feedback for each target learner group. In this respect, the present study has provided useful hints for efficient L2 writing instruction and meaningful research studies in the future.

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（小川　喜正　　英語コミュニケーション学科）